



Fort Ransom events showcase art, support economy

By Dana Schaar

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Art can bring a community together. At least, it does in Fort Ransom each September when the annual Fall Festival brings 8,000 to 10,000 people into the small community for two days of arts and crafts, musical entertainment, and food. "It really is amazing that a town of 70 can have the festival so well organized," says local photographer Rose Reis-Jackson. "Everybody in town gets recruited and works."

This was the 39th year the community pulled together for the Fall Festival, which is sponsored by the Sheyenne Valley Arts and Crafts Association (SVACA) the last full weekend in September. The festival attracts about 200 vendors each year, says Lori Carlson, coordinator of the craft show. Activities are spread all over town, including Bear Creek Hall, which underwent renovation in preparation for this year's event. "We've been fixing up Bear Creek Hall, an old church from the prairie," says Carlson. They have painted and added new lights to the building, which showcases fine arts upstairs and

offers demonstrations in the basement.

The art festival originated with a local couple's encouragement of arts in the Fort Ransom area. Anne and Bjarne Ness began inviting artists into their home and yard in 1967. This led to the formation of SVACA, incorporated in 1974, and its arts and crafts festival of today.

The Fall Festival is a community-wide event that provides not only a venue for artists but also helps sustain the community economically, according to Reis-Jackson. "It's incredible that a little town can bring in up to 10,000 people," she says. "It truly brings in enough to get the town through the winter. Revenues from one single weekend can really make a difference."

Reis-Jackson is one of the artists who exhibited her work at this year's festival. She and her husband moved to Fort Ransom from southern California several years ago. The move has allowed her to spend more time on her still life and landscape photography. She finds the old barns in North Dakota particularly interesting. "Anywhere else they would have been torn down," she says. "They are sentinels to a former time."

Photographs are just one of the artistic mediums exhibited at the festival. "There are so many different vendors and lots to look at. Every part of town has something to offer," Carlson says. "And it's a beautiful place to come, even just to look around for the sightseeing."

Fort Ransom is an artistic community, and SVACA leads the way, according to elementary teacher Katherine Kwapinski. She coordinates the North Dakota Council on the Arts Artists-in-Residence program for the Fort Ransom School, a project supported by SVACA for about 10 years. Grand Forks opera singer Louise Pinkerton will spend a week with K-6 students this fall, introducing them to opera and concluding with a student production of mimed opera. Kwapinski says it is wonderful to have professional artists work with students.



Spinners display their talents at Sodbuster Days. At top of page, the annual Fall Festival always draws a crowd.

“You don’t know how it might spark an interest for them later on in life,” she says.

SVACA also operates an arts and crafts and antique store called Timeless Treasures during the summer months and provides financial support to the Ransom Historical County Museum. Both the store and museum are located in Fort Ransom.

Sodbuster Days showcases tradition

Sodbuster Days at Fort Ransom State Park, located two miles north of Fort Ransom, offers a different kind of showcase for artists, those demonstrating more traditional crafts and music. Like the Fall Festival, Sodbuster Days brings an economic boost to Fort Ransom. “It is good that the town benefits also,” says demonstrations chair Mary Johnson.

The Fort Ransom Sodbuster Association, a group dedicated to preserving the farming era of the early 1900s, has held Sodbuster Days each July and September for 23 years. Among the many activities are demonstrations of handcrafts such as quilting, spinning, and tatting. Fort Ransom resident Arlys Sorby enjoys demonstrating Hardanger, or Norwegian, embroidery during the event. “You get to meet a lot of nice people,” she says.

Sorby learned how to do Hardanger in 1983 when she took a class with her sister. Her heritage is “all Norwegian,” she says, “but no one in her family knew how.” She purchased some Hardanger books and practiced the technique. When her grandchildren were born, she decided to make baptismal gowns for them that could be handed down. One of her gowns, along with a cap and bib, has been donated to the State Historical Society of North Dakota. Another of her Hardanger pieces is on display at the North Dakota State Hospital in Jamestown.

She taught a class in Hardanger this spring but isn’t sure how many of her students will stick with it. “It takes patience,” Sorby says. Of all the handwork she does, Hardanger is her favorite. “It’s a true thing that’s come from Norway,” says Sorby. “I just love it. I can’t leave it alone once I get started.”

Sodbuster Days also gives local musicians a chance to share their talents. The Sodbuster Association dedicated a new music building on September 9. Johnson says that volunteer musicians who play traditional, old-time music have always been a part of

The new music building provides a stage for community musicians like these shown at right. Above, Arlys Sorby’s Hardanger embroidery is one of the traditional crafts displayed at Sodbuster Days.

the event. In the beginning, the musicians performed on the lawn, progressed to a flatbed, and eventually played under a tent. But that just wasn’t adequate. “The musicians really hold people,” she says, “but someplace was needed for them to perform.”

The Fort Ransom Sodbuster Association received donations from people to support the building project. It is tucked back into the hill and built to look like a shed so that it blends in with the other farm buildings. The facility has a good sound system, storage room for musicians’ instruments, and a little dance floor. “People can dance all day long if they want to,” Johnson says. The building was first used this past July, and the musicians were ecstatic, according to Johnson. “I hope that it’s there for a long time to come.”

The Sodbuster Association hopes the new building sparks more opportunities for community music events. Johnson says one of the events the group is working on is a bluegrass festival. One thing is certain. When arts are involved, residents of Fort Ransom pull together and put on an event sure to entertain thousands of visitors and help their community thrive.

For more information about SVACA, call 701-973-4461 or e-mail svaca@drtel.net. The Fort Ransom Sodbusters Association can be reached at 701-973-4331 or its website at www.parkrec.nd.gov/Parks/Ransom/sodbusters.htm.

Artist-in-Residence programs are supported by grant funding through the North Dakota Council on the Arts. For more information about the North Dakota Council on the Arts and its programs that support communities across the state, call 701-328-7590 or visit its website at www.discovernd.com/arts.

